

Essay:

# Monitory democracy and media-saturated societies

Author:

**John Keane**

**T**here is a need for a fundamental revision of the way we think about democracy in our times. An epochal transformation has been taking place in the contours and dynamics of representative democracy. From roughly the mid-twentieth century representative democracy began to morph into a new historical form of 'post-representative' democracy. The fundamental implications of this change for democracy in the coming years need to be explored. The 'end of history' perspectives and maritime metaphors are too limited to grasp the epochal change – too bound to the surface of things, too preoccupied with continuities and aggregate data to notice that political tides have begun to run in entirely new directions.

My claim is that our world is now living through an historic sea change, one that is taking us away from the old world of representative democracy towards a form of democracy with entirely different contours and dynamics. In media-saturated societies which bristle with communicative abundance – questions about the causes and causers of this new historical form of democracy, its advantages and disadvantages, have fundamental implications for media and politics, and profound implications for how we think about and practise democracy and journalism in the coming decades.

It is hard to find an elegant name for the emergent form of democracy, let alone to describe and explain in a few words its workings and political implications. The strange-sounding term 'monitory democracy' is the most exact for describing the great transformation that is taking hold in regions like Europe and South Asia and in countries otherwise as different as the United States, Japan, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

My opening conjecture is that monitory democracy is a new historical type of democracy, a variety of 'post-Westminster' politics defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms. These monitory bodies take root within the 'domestic' fields of government and civil society, as well as in cross-border settings. In consequence, the whole architecture of

self-government is changing. The central grip of elections, political parties and parliaments on the lives of citizens is weakening. Democracy is coming to mean more than elections, although nothing less. Within and outside states, independent monitors of power begin to have tangible effects. By putting politicians, parties and elected governments permanently on their toes, they complicate their lives, question their authority and force them to change their agendas – and sometimes as former West Australian Premier Brian Burke found, can smother them in disgrace.

Whether or not the trend towards this new kind of democracy is a sustainable, historically irreversible development remains to be seen; like its two previous historical antecedents, monitory democracy is not inevitable. It did not have to happen, but it has.

Certainly when judged by its institutional contours and inner dynamics, monitory democracy is the most complex form of democracy yet. Those with a taste for Latin would say that it is the *tertium quid*, the not fully formed successor of the earlier historical experiments with assembly-based and representative forms of democracy. One symptom of its novelty is the altered language through which millions of people now describe democracy. In the name of ‘people’, ‘the public’, ‘public accountability’, ‘the people’ or ‘citizens’ – the terms are normally used interchangeably in the age of monitory democracy – power-scrutinising institutions spring up all over the place. Elections, political parties and legislatures neither disappear, nor necessarily decline in importance, but they most definitely lose their pivotal position in politics.

Democracy is no longer simply a way of handling the power of elected governments by electoral and parliamentary and constitutional means, and no longer a matter confined to territorial states. Gone are the days when democracy could be described – and in the next breath attacked – as ‘government by the unrestricted will of the majority’ as Friedrich von Hayek once wrote. Whether in the field of local, national or supranational government, or in the power-ridden world of non-governmental organisations and networks, some of them stretching down into the roots of everyday life and outwards towards the four corners of the earth, people and organisations that exercise power are now routinely subject to public monitoring and public contestation by an assortment of extra-parliamentary bodies.

In the age of monitory democracy, the rules of representation, democratic accountability and public participation are applied to a much wider range of settings than ever before. Here is one striking clue for understanding why this is happening: the age of monitory democracy that began around 1945 has witnessed the birth of nearly a hundred new types of power-scrutinising institutions unknown to previous democrats.

Defenders of these inventions often speak of their importance in solving a basic problem facing contemporary democracies: how to promote the unfinished business of finding new ways of democratic living for little people in big and complex societies, in which substantial numbers of citizens believe that politicians are not easily trusted, and in which governments are often accused of abusing their power or being out of touch with citizens, or simply unwilling to deal with their concerns and problems.

By addressing such concerns, the new power-scrutinising inventions break the grip of the majority rule principle – the worship of numbers – associated with representative democracy. Freed as well from the measured caution and double speak of political parties, some inventions give a voice to the strongly felt concerns of minorities that feel left out of official politics. Some monitors, electoral commissions and consumer protection agencies for instance, use their claimed ‘neutrality’ to protect the rules of the democratic game from predators and enemies. Other monitors publicise long-term issues that are neglected, or dealt with badly, by the short-term mentality encouraged by election cycles. Still other monitory groups are remarkable for their evanescence; in a fast-changing world, they come on the scene, stir the pot, then move on like nomads, or dissolve into thin air.

By making room for opinions and ways of life that people feel strongly about, despite their neglect or suppression by parties, parliaments and governments, these inventions have the combined effect of raising the level and quality of public monitoring of power, often for the first time in many areas of life, including power relationships ‘beneath’ and ‘beyond’ the institutions of territorial states.

It is little wonder that the new power-monitoring inventions have changed the language of contemporary politics. They prompt much talk of ‘empowerment’, ‘high energy democracy’, ‘stakeholders’, ‘participatory governance’, ‘communicative democracy’ and ‘deliberative democracy’; and they help spread, often for the first time, a culture of voting into many walks of life. Monitory democracy is the age of surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions and audience and customer voting. Whether intended or not, the spreading culture of voting, backed by the new mechanisms for monitoring power, has the effect of interrupting and often silencing the soliloquies of parties, politicians and parliaments.

The new power-scrutinising innovations tend to enfranchise many more citizens’ voices, sometimes by means of unelected representatives skilled at using what Americans sometimes call ‘bully pulpits’. The number and range of monitory institutions have so greatly increased that they point to a world where the old rule of ‘one person, one vote, one representative’ – the central demand in the struggle for representative democracy – is replaced with the new principle of monitory democracy: ‘one person, many interests, many voices, multiple votes, and multiple representatives’.

**C**autious must be exercised when trying to understand these new methods of restraining power; they are not cut from the same cloth and therefore need careful examination. The new monitory inventions are not exclusively 'American' or 'European' or 'Australian' or 'Western' products. Among their more remarkable features is the way that they have rapidly diffused around the globe. They mushroom in a wide variety of different settings – participatory budgeting is a Brazilian invention; truth and reconciliation commissions hail from Central America, while integrity commissions first sprang up with force in Australia – and there are even signs, for the first time in the history of democracy, of mounting awareness of the added value of the art of invention – as if the democratic ability to invent is itself a most valuable invention.

Monitory mechanisms are not just information-providing mechanisms. They operate in different ways, on different fronts. Some scrutinise power primarily at the level of citizen input to government or civil society bodies; other monitory mechanisms are preoccupied with monitoring and contesting what are called policy throughputs; still others concentrate on scrutinising policy outputs produced by governmental or non-governmental organisations. Quite a few of the inventions concentrate simultaneously on all three dimensions. Monitory mechanisms also come in different sizes and operate on various spatial scales, ranging from 'just round the corner' bodies with merely local footprints to global networks aimed at keeping tabs on those who exercise power over great distances.

Given such variations, it should not be surprising that a quick short list of the post-1945 inventions resembles – at first sight, to the untrained eye – a magpie's nest of randomly collected items. The list includes: citizen juries, bioregional assemblies, participatory budgeting, advisory boards, focus groups and 'talkaoke' (local/global talk shows broadcast live on the internet). There are think tanks, consensus conferences, teach-ins, public memorials, local community consultation schemes and open houses that offer information and advisory and advocacy services, archive and research facilities and opportunities for professional networking. Citizens' assemblies, democratic audits, brainstorming conferences, conflict of interest boards, public meeting trigger clauses, global associations of parliamentarians against corruption and constitutional safaris (famously used by the drafters of the new South African constitution to examine best practice elsewhere) are on the list. So too are the inventions of India's banyan democracy: railway courts, Lok Adalats, public interest litigation and satyagraha methods of civil resistance. Included as well are consumer testing agencies and consumer councils, online petitions and chat rooms, democracy clubs and democracy cafés, public vigils, peaceful sieges, protestivals (a South Korean speciality), summits and global watchdog organisations set up to bring greater public accountability to business and other civil society bodies.

The list of innovations extends to deliberative polls, boards of accountancy, independent religious courts, experts' councils (such as the 'Five Wise Men' of the Council of Economic Advisers in Germany), public 'scorecards' – yellow cards and white lists – public planning exercises, public consultations, social forums, weblogs, electronic civil disobedience and websites dedicated to monitoring the abuse of power (such as Bully OnLine, a British initiative that aims to tackle workplace bullying and related issues). And the list of new inventions includes self-selected opinion polls and unofficial ballots (text-messaged straw polls, for instance), international criminal courts, global social forums and the tendency of increasing numbers of non-governmental organisations to adopt written constitutions, with an elected component.

Let us pause, for evidently the list of inventions is disjointed, and potentially confusing. Clear-headed thinking is needed to spot the qualities that these inventions share in common. Monitory institutions play various roles. They are committed to providing publics with extra viewpoints and better information about the operations and performance of various governmental and non-governmental bodies. Because they appeal to publics, monitory institutions are not to be confused with top-down surveillance mechanisms that operate in secret, for the private purposes of organisations of government or civil society. Monitory mechanisms are geared as well to the definition, scrutiny and enforcement of public standards and ethical rules for preventing corruption, or the improper behaviour of those responsible for making decisions, not only in the field of elected government, but in a wide variety of settings. The new institutions of monitory democracy are further defined by their overall commitment to strengthening the diversity and influence of citizens' voices and choices in decisions that affect their lives – regardless of the outcome of elections.

What is distinctive about this new historical type of democracy is the way all fields of social and political life come to be scrutinised, not just by the standard machinery of representative democracy, but by a whole host of non-party, extra-parliamentary and often unelected bodies operating within and underneath and beyond the boundaries of territorial states. In the era of monitory democracy, it is as if the principles of representative democracy – public openness, citizens' equality, selecting representatives – are superimposed on representative democracy itself. This has many practical consequences, but one especially striking effect is to alter the patterns of interaction – political geography – of democratic institutions.

Once upon a time, in the brief heyday of representative democracy, the thing called democracy had a rather simple political geography. Within the confines of any given state, democracy meant (from the point of view of citizens) following an election campaign and on the great day of reckoning turning out to vote for a party or independent candidate. He – it was almost always a man – was someone local, a

figure known to the community, a local shopkeeper or professional or someone in business or a trade unionist, for instance.

Then came democracy's great ceremonial, the pause of deliberation, the calm of momentary reflection, the catharsis of ticking and crossing, before the storm of result. 'Universal peace is declared', was the sarcastic way the nineteenth-century English woman novelist George Eliot (1819–80) put it, 'and the foxes have a sincere interest in prolonging the lives of the poultry.' Her American contemporary, Walt Whitman (1819–92), spoke more positively of the pivotal function of polling day as the great 'choosing day', the 'powerfulest scene', a 'swordless conflict' mightier than Niagara Falls or the Mississippi River or the geysers of Yosemite, a 'still small voice vibrating', a time for 'the peaceful choice of all', a passing moment of suspended animation when 'the heart pants, life glows'.

If blessed with enough votes, the local representative joined a privileged small circle of legislators, whose job was to stay in line with party policy, support or oppose a government that used its majority in the legislature, to pass laws and to monitor their implementation and administration, hopefully with results that pleased as many of the represented as possible. At the end of a limited stint as legislator, buck passing stopped. Foxes and poultry fell quiet. It was again time for the swordless conflict of the great choosing day. The representative either stepped down into retirement or faced the music of re-election.

This is obviously a simplified sketch of the role of elections, but it serves to highlight the different, more complex political geography of monitory democracy. Just as representative democracies preserved the spirit and form of ancient assemblies, so monitory democracies preserves legislatures, political parties and elections, which (to the contrary) are often bitterly fought and closely contested and sometimes (as the recent American presidential and senate election shows) exciting affairs. But such is the growing variety of interlaced, power-monitoring mechanisms that democrats from earlier times, if catapulted into the new world of monitory democracy, would find it hard to understand what is happening.

The new democracy demands a headshift, a break with conventional thinking in order to understand its political geography. For this purpose, let us imagine for a moment, as if from an aerial satellite, the contours of monitory democracy. We would spot that its power-scrutinising institutions are less centred on elections, parties and legislatures; no longer confined to the territorial state; and spatially arranged in ways much messier than textbooks on democracy typically suppose. The vertical 'depth' and horizontal 'reach' of monitory institutions is striking. If the number of levels within any hierarchy of institutions is a measure of its 'depth', and if the number of units located within each of these levels is called its 'span' or 'width', then monitory democracy is the deepest and widest system of democracy ever known. The political geography of mechanisms like audit commissions,

citizens' assemblies, web-based think tanks, local assemblies, regional parliaments, summits and global watchdog organisations defies simple-minded descriptions. So too does the political geography of the wider constellation of power-checking and power-disputing mechanisms in which they are embedded – bodies like citizen assemblies and juries, audit and integrity commissions and many other watchdog organisations set up to bring greater public accountability to business and other civil society bodies.

**B**oth the novelty and complexity of monitory democracy make it vulnerable to a handful of misconceptions, beginning with the claim that the struggle to bring greater public accountability to government and non-government organisations that wield power over others is in effect a struggle for 'grassroots democracy' or 'participatory democracy' or 'popular empowerment'.

Such metaphors rest on a misunderstanding of the trends. The age of monitory democracy is not heading backwards; it is not motivated by efforts to recapture the (imagined) spirit of assembly-based democracy – 'power to the people', as some supporters of groups like Students for a Democratic Society liked to say during the rebellions of the 1960s. Many contemporary champions of 'deep' or 'direct' democracy still speak as if they were Greeks, as if what really counts in matters of democracy is as Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright put it, 'the commitment and capacities of ordinary people to make sensible decisions through reasoned deliberation and empowered because they attempt to tie action to discussion'.

The reality of monitory democracy is otherwise, in that all of the new power-scrutinising experiments in the name of 'the people' or citizens' empowerment rely inevitably on representation. These experiments often draw their ultimate legitimacy from 'the people',<sup>2</sup> but they are not understandable as efforts to abolish the gap between representatives and the represented, as if citizens could live without others acting on their behalf, find their true selves and express themselves as equals within a unified political community no longer burdened by miscommunication, or by misgovernment.

Monitory democracy thrives on representation. Take the much-discussed example of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in the Canadian province of British Columbia. Backed by the local legislature, the Citizens' Assembly worked for the best part of a year as an independent, non-partisan assembly of representatives charged with the task of casting a critical eye over the province's electoral system. The Assembly had 161 members; it included one woman and one man drawn randomly from each of the province's seventy-nine electoral districts, plus two indigenous citizen representatives, as well as one representative from the province's Legislative Assembly. The member representatives of the Citizens' Assembly were not elected, but drawn by lot. In contrast to the Greek trust in the deities as underwriters of decisions determined

by lot, the Assembly members were chosen at random by a computer, from a pool that was supposed to reflect the age, gender and geographical make-up of British Columbian citizens. Granted its own budget, the Citizens' Assembly was designed to operate outside the system of political parties, and to keep its distance from the legislature, organised lobby groups and journalists. Its duty was to act as an unelected body of temporary representatives of all British Columbians.

**A**nother misconception, to do with the changing status of elections, prevents many people from spotting the novelty of monitory democracy. It is vital to grasp that this new type of democracy does not dispense with questions of suffrage, or voting in national or local elections. It is not an age that has settled once and for all the issue of who is entitled to vote, and under which conditions (think of the emerging legal and political controversies about who owns the software of unreliable electronic voting machines). In fact, some people – for instance, felons – have their votes withdrawn; others, including diasporas, minority language speakers, the disabled and people with low literacy and number skills, are disadvantaged by secret ballot elections; still other constituencies, such as women, young people and the biosphere, are either poorly represented, or they are not represented at all.

Struggles to open up and improve the quality of electoral representation are by no means finished. And yet in the era of monitory democracy the franchise struggles that once tugged and tore whole societies apart have lost their centrality. As the culture of voting spreads, and as unelected representatives multiply in many different contexts, a brand new issue begins to surface. The old question that racked the age of representative democracy – who is entitled to vote and when – is compounded and complicated by a question for which there are still no easy answers: are people entitled to representation between and outside elections and, if so, through which representatives?

A symptom of the changing definition of democracy is the advent of election monitoring. During the 1980s, for the first time in the history of democracy, founding elections in new or strife-torn polities began to be monitored systematically by outside teams of observers. The practice was admittedly an older invention, first used in 1857 when Prussian, French, British, Russian, Turkish and Austrian representatives jointly supervised a plebiscite in Moldavia and Wallachia; but in the new circumstances, the methods of election monitoring assumed a much more powerful and publicly visible role, this time on a global scale.

The net effect of election monitoring is to heighten globally the sense that elections matter; that efforts should be redoubled to find and apply contextually sensitive quality standards; that election observers themselves need watching; and that 'fair and open' methods – the elimination of violence, intimidation, ballot-



rigging and other forms of political tomfoolery – are expected of all countries, including the most powerful democracy, the United States, where observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe played a role for the first time in the presidential elections of November 2004 and where, in the 2008 elections, the competing sides proved that the legal monitoring of elections is becoming as common a campaign tool as fundraising and advertising by assembling literally thousands of lawyers at state level to protect their supporters at the polls, help untangle ballot problems and run to court should litigation be necessary – Senator Barack Obama’s campaign for instance sent five thousand lawyers to Florida alone.

**A**mong the remarkable features of monitory democracy is the way power-scrutinising mechanisms gradually spread into areas of social life that previously were untouched by democratic hands. The extension of democracy downwards, into realms of power beneath and cutting across the institutions of territorial states, has the effect of arousing great interest in the old eighteenth-century European term ‘civil society’; for the first time in the history of democracy, these two words are now routinely used by democrats in all four corners of the earth.

The intense public concern with civil society and with publicly scrutinising matters once thought to be non-political is unique to the age of monitory democracy. The era of representative democracy, as Alexis de Tocqueville spotted, certainly saw the rise of self-organised pressure groups and schemes for ‘socialising’ the power of government, for instance through workers’ control of industry. Few of these schemes survived the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, which makes the contrast with monitory democracy all the more striking.

The trend towards public scrutiny is strongly evident in all kinds of policy areas, ranging from public concern about the maltreatment and legal rights of children and bodily habits related to exercise and diet, through to the development of habitat protection plans and non-carbon and non-nuclear sources of energy. Initiatives to guarantee that the future development of nanotechnology and genetically modified crops is governed publicly in the interests of the many, not the few – efforts to take democracy ‘upstream’ into the tributaries of scientific research and technical development are a further example of the same trend.

Experiments with fostering new forms of citizens’ participation and elected representation have even penetrated markets, to lay hands on the sacred cow of private property. A notable example is the German system of codetermination known as *Mitbestimmung*; following the near-collapse of banking systems during 2007–08, many new proposals are now on the political table to extend monitoring mechanisms into the banking and investment sectors of global markets that previously operated with little or no regulatory restraint.

There is rising awareness as well of the possibility and desirability of exercising rights of criticism and casting a vote in large-scale global organisations. An example is the International Olympic Committee: once an exclusive private gentlemen's club, it became during the 1980s the focus of muckraking journalism. Scandals ensued. Public outcries followed. Under pressure, against considerable odds, the IOC began to apply monitory mechanisms to its own corrupted structures. Some things didn't change. By 2002, the IOC body of 115 co-opted members included only twelve women; in that year, not one woman was among the sixty-six new member nominations.

But some things did change. Visits by IOC members to candidate cities were banned. An IOC Ethics Commission and a World Anti-Doping Agency were formed. Reports of income and expenditure were published, for the first time. IOC meetings were thrown open to the media. A so-called Nominations Committee was set up for the purpose of more fairly deciding IOC membership, which was restricted to an eight-year term, renewable through election. Olympic athletes were granted the right to elect their own representatives directly to the IOC. The upper age limit of IOC members was reduced from eighty to seventy.

The rules of representative government were for the first time applied to its inner workings, at least on paper.

**T**he vital role played by civil societies in the invention of power-monitoring mechanisms seems to confirm what might be called James Madison's 'Law of Free Government': no government can be considered free unless it is capable of governing a society that is itself capable of controlling the government. Madison's sketch of The Law in *The Federalist Papers*, number 51, has tempted some people to mistakenly conclude that governments are incapable of scrutinising their own power. The truth is otherwise. In the era of monitory democracy, experience shows that governments, unlike ducks and turkeys, sometimes vote to sacrifice themselves for the good of citizen guests at the dinner table.

Government 'watchdog' institutions are a case in point. Their stated purpose is public scrutiny of government by semi-independent government agencies.<sup>3</sup> Scrutiny mechanisms supplement the power-monitoring role of elected government representatives and judges, even though this is not always their stated aim; very often they are introduced under the general authority of elected governments – for instance, through ministerial responsibility.

In practice, things often turn out differently. Especially when protected by legislation, well resourced and well managed, government scrutiny bodies tend to take on a life of their own. Building on the much older precedents of royal commissions, public inquiries and independent auditors checking the financial probity of government agencies – inventions that had their roots in the age of

representative democracy – the new scrutiny mechanisms add checks and balances to the possible abuse of power by elected representatives. Often they are justified in terms of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government, for instance through ‘better informed’ decision-making that has the added advantage of raising the level of public trust in political institutions among citizens considered ‘stakeholders’.

The process contains a double paradox. Not only are government scrutiny mechanisms often established by governments who subsequently fail to control their workings – for instance, in cases of corruption and the enforcement of legal standards; the new mechanisms also have democratic, power-checking effects, even though they are normally staffed by un-elected officials who operate at several arms’ length from the rhythm of periodic elections.

The independent ‘integrity systems’ that came to enjoy an important public profile in various states in Australia from the 1980s are good examples. Following repeated media exposure of fraud and corruption among politicians and police, in some cases with links to business and organised crime, monitory agencies were established to bring new eyes, ears and teeth to the public sector. The aim was to crack down on intentional wrongdoing or misconduct by elected representatives and appointed officials; fingers were pointed as well at the lax and self-serving complaints systems operated by the police, who are to democratic governments as sharp edges are to knives. Misgivings were also expressed about the reluctance of elected ministers to oversee publicly sensitive police operational matters. Two royal commissions in the state of South Australia during the 1970s led to the establishment in 1985 of the first Police Complaints Authority. Other states followed suit, culminating in Queensland’s Criminal Justice Commission (later the Crime and Misconduct Commission). Established in 1990 as a combined anti-corruption and criminal detection body, it was charged with the job of exposing corruption within the public sector, undertaking crime research, gathering evidence of organised crime, and tracking and recovering criminal proceeds.

In the age of monitory democracy, a great wall of prejudice still surrounds the whole idea of ‘cross-border’ or ‘international’ democracy. The prejudice dates from the era of territorially bound representative democracy, and almost all leading scholars of democracy today defend its supposed truth. One interesting thing about monitory democracy is that it begins to confront that wall with a hammer. Its latticed patterns of power monitoring effectively fudge the distinction between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’. Like other types of institutions, including business and universities, democracy too is caught up in a process of ‘glocalisation’.

Monitory mechanisms are dynamically interrelated, to the point where each functions simultaneously as both part and whole of the overall system. In the system

of monitory democracy, to put things a bit abstractly, parts and wholes in an absolute sense do not exist. Its units are better described as sub-wholes – ‘holons’ is the term famously coined by the Hungarian polymath Arthur Koestler – that function simultaneously as self-regarding and self-asserting entities that push and pull each other in a multi-lateral system in which all entities play a part.

The example of summits, a remarkable invention of the second half of the twentieth century, helps bring this language down to earth. A strange fact is that summits began as exercises in big power politics, as informal ad hoc meetings of heads of state or leaders of government, or foreign ministers – the kind of meetings that first took place during the fragile Soviet/American/British alliance against Hitler. Some people have said that the word ‘summit’ was first used to describe the so-called ‘percentages agreement’ at the October 1944 meeting in Moscow, when Churchill and Stalin speculated about their ratios of influence in the post war world. The strange mathematical origin of the word (a corruption, perhaps in Stalin’s virtually non-existent English, of ‘sum it’) was a one-off. It soon morphed into a mountaineers’ term. Churchill himself long continued to advocate the tactic of high-level informal meetings in international relations. He spoke of ‘summit diplomacy’ and the benefits of a ‘parley at the summit’, which is the sense that prevailed in Geneva in 1955, when the climbing word ‘summit’ was used for the first time to describe a Cold War meeting of the political leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, France and Britain.

From the end of World War II until the time of the famous Vienna Summit meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev in June 1961, there were well over a hundred such summits, each using broadly similar methods. The meetings were preoccupied with the dynamics of the Cold War, and so had both a global reach and a strong bipolarity about them. Whether used as tools of amity or enmity, these early summits were also marked by a strong measure of predictability. The rule was that no statesman was willing to risk the certainty of humiliation. Hence the great attention paid to dramaturgy. ‘It ended, as it began, with two firm hands firmly clasped,’ began the rather ritualised *Newsweek* report of the Kennedy–Khrushchev summit. Such media coverage usually put ceremonial trivia on a pedestal; at one point, during the summit preparations, the question of whether Jackie Kennedy should be given a silver tea service was reportedly decided by Khrushchev with the blustering judgement that ‘presents can be given even before a war’. The effect – like the old rituals of European monarchy – was to reinforce the sense among audiences that these were top-down affairs, instances of how the world was run by just a handful of men.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the wholly surprising thing about summits was their dramatic transformation into sites where the power of elected representatives was publicly contested. Summits morphed into monitory mechanisms. The altered meaning and function of summits was evident at the series

of high-level meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev, including the 1986 Reykjavik gathering, where without prior consultation with NATO and other bodies the abolition of ballistic missiles and strategic nuclear weapons – including all nuclear weapons – was proposed. From there on, summits began to be used by leaders to ‘bounce’ their bureaucracies into policy shifts. That had the knock-on effect of politicising government, making it clear to wider audiences, both inside and outside government, that different political options existed.

The growth of summitry cloaked in secrecy and pageantry backfired. Summits began to attract the attention of thousands of journalists eager to report stories and images of this exclusive and powerful club. Beginning with the Bonn G7 Summit in May 1985, which attracted thirty thousand demonstrators demanding greater global justice, its annual meetings provided an opportunity for civil society organisations and protesters to press their concerns related to matters ranging from international trade and terrorism to energy development and cross-border crime – in effect, by turning rulers into culpable representatives. Attempts to transform top-down governmental summits into new channels of bottom-up representation of the interests of civil society were not confined to the G7 and G8, though they have attracted some of the most spectacular attention – for instance, in July 2005 at the Live 8 ‘global awareness’ concerts to encourage political leaders to ‘Make Poverty History’.

It is sometimes said that the business of power scrutiny changes very little, that states and corporations are still the ‘real’ centres of power in deciding who gets what, when and how in this world. Evidence that this is not necessarily so is suggested by the fact that all of the big public issues that have erupted around the world since 1945, including civil rights for women and minorities, American military intervention in Vietnam and Iraq, nuclear weapons, poverty reduction and global warming, have been generated not by political parties, elections, legislatures and governments, but principally by power-monitoring networks that run ‘parallel’ to – and are often positioned against – the orthodox mechanisms of party-based representation.

The powerful civil rights movement that sprang up during the 1950s in the United States was among the pacesetters. Its inventive tactics – bus boycotts, improvement associations, co-ordinating committees, sit-ins, kneel-ins, ‘jail-no-bail’ pledges, freedom rides, citizenship schools, freedom singing, voter registration drives, mock elections – were proof positive that monitory bodies could have effects upon existing power relations by forcing many people to sense their contingency, often through bitter battles, sometimes resulting in surprising victories for those bent on humbling the powerful. The tactics produced two historic pieces of legislation. The Civil Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964, barred racial discrimination in public accommodations, education and

employment. The Voting Rights Act he signed a year later on August 6, 1965, abolished literacy tests, poll taxes and other restrictions on voting, as well as authorised federal government intervention in states and individual voting districts that continued to use such tests to discriminate against African Americans.

The enactment of the double-barrelled legislation was monitory democracy in action. It proved that the powerless had the power to change things, and that change had to begin in the home, the workplace and in other public fields of everyday life, before spreading across the whole of the political and social landscape of the American democracy – eventually resulting in the election of the first black president of the United States.

**N**ow that we have tackled some misconceptions about the contours and main dynamics of monitory democracy, let me pause finally to ask one short question: how can its unplanned birth be explained?

This is not an easy question to answer. The motives behind the hundred or so inventions described above are complicated; as in earlier phases of the history of democracy, generalisations are as difficult as they are perilous. But one thing is certain: the new type of democracy has had both its causes and causers. Monitory democracy is not a monogenic matter – a living thing hatched from a single cell. It is rather the result of many forces. As in the two earlier phases of democracy, changes usually happened only when cracks developed within ruling circles, so allowing the courage of citizens and the resolve of public-spirited leaders to do the rest.

A half-century of total war, dictatorship and totalitarianism that very nearly finished off democracy – in 1941 there were only eleven democracies left on the face of the earth – proved to be the initial catalyst. The widespread despair and troubled thinking about political evil triggered by the disaster undoubtedly helped inspire one of the most remarkable features of monitory democracy: the marriage of democracy and human rights, and the subsequent worldwide growth of organisations, networks and campaigns committed to the defence of human rights.

Personal ambition, monkey business, power games and the quest for more effective or cheaper government – and government eager to offload blame on to others for policy disappointments and failures – have all also played their part. So too have conservative instincts, radical demands, geopolitical considerations and market pressures. Opportunities for building ‘social capital’ – cultivating the connections and skills among people at the local and regional levels – and the lure of winning power or revenue growth from the provision of outsourced government services has strongly motivated some organisations, especially non-government organisations, to push for stronger monitory institutions.

Unintended consequences and plain good luck have also played their part in the early history of monitory democracy. Not unimportant as well has been a factor

famously outlined by de Tocqueville: the contagious force of the belief among citizens and their representatives that the removal of particular grievances enables other grievances to be addressed, and resolved.

**A**ll these pressures have conspired to push actually existing democracies in the direction of monitory democracy. But one force is turning out to be the principal driver: the emergence of a new galaxy of communication media.

No account of monitory democracy would be credible without taking into account the way that power and conflict are shaped by new media institutions. Think of it like this: assembly-based democracy in ancient Greek times belonged to an era dominated by the spoken word, backed up by laws written on papyrus and stone, and by messages dispatched by foot, or by donkey and horse. Representative democracy sprang up in the era of print culture – the book, pamphlet and newspaper, and telegraphed and mailed messages – and fell into crisis during the advent of early mass communication media, especially radio and cinema and television in its infancy.

By contrast, monitory democracy is tied closely to the growth of multimedia-saturated societies – societies whose structures of power are continuously 'bitten' by monitory institutions operating within a new galaxy of media defined by the ethos of communicative abundance.

Compared with the era of representative democracy, when print culture and limited spectrum audio-visual media (including public service broadcasting) were much more closely aligned with political parties and governments, the age of monitory democracy witnesses constant public scrutiny and spats about power, to the point where it seems as if no organisation or leader within the fields of government or social life is immune from political trouble.

The change has been shaped by a variety of forces, including the decline of journalism proud of its commitment to fact-based 'objectivity' which was an ideal born of the age of representative democracy, and the rise of adversarial and 'gotcha' styles of commercial journalism driven by ratings, sales and hits. Technical factors, such as electronic memory, tighter channel spacing, new frequency allocation, direct satellite broadcasting, digital tuning and advanced compression techniques, have also been important. Chief among these technical factors is the advent of cable- and satellite-linked computerised communications, which from the end of the 1960s triggered both product and process innovations in virtually every field of an increasingly commercialised media.

This new galaxy of media has no historical precedent. Symbolised by one of its core components, the internet, it is a whole new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices that, for the first time in human history, integrate texts, sounds and images and enable communication to take place through multiple user

points, in chosen time, either real or delayed, within modularised and ultimately global networks that are affordable and accessible to many hundreds of millions of people scattered across the globe.

All institutions in the business of scrutinising power rely heavily on these media innovations; if the new galaxy of communicative abundance suddenly imploded, monitory democracy would not last long. Monitory democracy and computerised media networks behave as if they are conjoined twins. To say this is not to fall into the trap of supposing that computer-linked communications networks prefigure a brand new utopian world, a carnival of 'virtual communities' homesteading on the electronic frontier, a 'cyber-revolution' that yields equal access of all citizens to all media, anywhere and at any time.

Hype of this kind was strongly evident in the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996), a document drawn up by the self-styled cyber-revolutionary John Perry Barlow, the former lyricist of famous rock band the Grateful Dead and subsequent campaign manager for infamous American vice-president, Dick Cheney. *The Declaration* proclaimed the end of the old world of representation within territorial states.

Making hype seem profound, it claimed that computer-linked networks were 'creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth'. Barlow said that communicative abundance heralded nothing short of 'a new social space, global and anti-sovereign, within which anybody, anywhere can express to the rest of humanity whatever he or she believes without fear'. 'There is in these new media,' he concluded, 'a foreshadowing of the intellectual and economic liberty that might undo all the authoritarian powers on earth.'<sup>4</sup>

Such utopian extravagance prompts a political health warning, not least because the new age of communicative abundance produces disappointment, instability and self-contradictions – for instance, in worrying patterns of closure or 'privatisation' of digital networks<sup>5</sup> and in the widening power gaps between communication rich and poor.

A majority of the world's people are too poor to make a telephone call; only a tiny minority have access to the internet; thus they seem almost unneeded as communicators, or as consumers of media products. The divide between media rich and media poor citizens blights all monitory democracies; it contradicts their basic principle that all citizens are entitled equally to communicate their opinions, and periodically to give elected and unelected representatives a rough ride.

Yet, despite such contradictions and disappointments, there are new and important things happening inside the swirling galaxy of communicative abundance. Especially striking is the way the realms of 'private life' and 'privacy' and wheeling and dealing of power 'in private' have been put on the defensive.



From the point of view of monitory democracy, that is no bad thing. Every nook and cranny of power – the quiet discriminations and injustices that happen behind closed doors and in the world of everyday life – become the potential target of ‘publicity’ and ‘public exposure’. Routine matters such as birth and death, diet and sex, religious and ethnic customs are less and less based on unthinking habit, on unquestioned, taken-for-granted certainties about ‘normal’ ways of doing things. In the era of communicative abundance, no hidden topic is protected unconditionally from media coverage, and from possible politicisation; the more ‘private’ it is, the more ‘publicity’ it seems to get.

**N**othing is sacrosanct – not even the efforts of those who try to protect or rebuild what they claim to be sacrosanct. Past generations would find the whole process astonishing in its global scale and democratic intensity. With the click of a camera, or the flick of a switch and the tap of a keyboard, the world of the private can suddenly be made public. Everything from the bedroom to the boardroom, the bureaucracy and the battlefield, seems to be up for media grabs. Thanks to stories told by journalists, themselves unelected representatives of publics, this is an age in which private text messages rebound publicly, to reveal marital unfaithfulness and force the resignation of a government minister as happened in Finland in 2008.

It is an era in which so-called reality TV can cut from an afternoon children’s program to a man on a freeway setting his truck ablaze before turning his shotgun on the police, and then himself, live, courtesy of a news helicopter and a satellite uplink. These are times in which Sony hand-held cameras are used by off-air reporters, known as ‘embeds’, to file ongoing videos and blogs featuring election candidates live, unplugged and unscripted; and this is the age in which video footage proves that soldiers in war zones raped women, terrorised children and tortured innocent civilians.

In the age of communicative abundance, the private lives of politicians, unelected representatives and celebrities, their romances, parties, health, drug habits, quarrels and divorces, are the interest and fantasy objects of millions of people. And thanks to talk shows, blogs, user-generated social networking sites, wiki platforms, YouTube video exchanges and other media acts, there is an endless procession of ‘ordinary people’ talking publicly about their private fears, fantasies, hopes and expectations. Some of them are sometimes lucky enough to morph into media stars, thanks to simulated elections, in which audiences granted a ‘vote’ by media companies are urged to lodge their preference for the star of their choice, by acclamation, cell phone or the internet.

Helped along by red-blooded journalism that relies on styles of reporting concerned less with veracity than with ‘breaking news’ and blockbusting scoops, communicative abundance cuts like a knife into the power relations of government and civil society. It is easy (as many do) to complain about the methods of the new

journalism. It hunts in packs, its eyes on bad news, egged on by the newsroom and bloggers saying that facts must never be allowed to get in the way of stories.

Professional and citizens' journalism loves titillation, draws upon unattributed sources, fills news holes – in the era of monitory democracy news never sleeps – spins sensations, and concentrates too much on personalities, rather than time-bound contexts. The new journalism is formulaic and gets bored too quickly; and it likes to bow down to corporate power and government press briefings, which helps explain why disinformation (about such matters as weapons of mass destruction and excessive leveraging of risks within financial markets) still whizzes around the world with frightening speed and power.

But these trends are only half the story. For in spite of all the accusations made against it, red-blooded journalism helps keep alive the old utopias of shedding light on power, of 'freedom of information', 'government in the sunshine' and greater 'transparency' in the making of decisions.

Given that unchecked power still weighs down hard on the heads of citizens, it is not surprising, thanks to the new journalism and the new monitory inventions, that public objections to wrongdoing and corruption are commonplace in the era of monitory democracy. Thanks to journalism and the new media of communicative abundance stuff happens. Shit happens. There seems to be no end of scandals, and there are even times when '-gate' scandals, like earthquakes, rumble beneath the feet of whole governments.

**T**he profusion of '-gate' scandals reminds us of a perennial problem facing monitory democracy: there is no shortage of organised efforts by the powerful to manipulate people beneath them; and hence the political dirty business of dragging power from the shadows and flinging it into the blazing halogen of publicity remains fundamentally important.

Nobody should be kidded into thinking that the world of monitory democracy, with its many power-scrutinising institutions, is a level playing field – a paradise of equality of opportunity among all its citizens and their elected and unelected representatives. We still live in the age of the put-on. The combination of monitory democracy and communicative abundance nevertheless produces permanent flux, an unending restlessness driven by complex combinations of different interacting players and institutions, permanently pushing and pulling, heaving and straining, sometimes working together, at other times in opposition to one another.

Elected and unelected representatives routinely strive to define and to determine who gets what, when and how, but the represented, taking advantage of various power-scrutinising devices, keep tabs on their representatives – sometimes with surprising success. The dynamics of monitory democracy are thus not describable using the simple spatial metaphors inherited from the age of representative

democracy. Talk of the 'sovereignty' of parliament, or of 'local' versus 'central' government, or of tussles between 'pressure groups', political parties and governments is just too simple. It is obsolete. In terms of political geometry, the system of monitory democracy is something other and different: a complex web of differently sized and more or less interdependent monitory bodies that have the effect, thanks to communicative abundance, of continuously stirring up questions about who gets what, when and how, as well as holding publicly responsible those who exercise power, wherever they are situated. Monitory democracies are richly conflicted. Politics does not wither away. Everything is never straightforwardly okay.

There is something utterly novel about the whole trend. From its origins in the ancient assemblies of Syria-Mesopotamia, democracy has always cut through habit and prejudice and hierarchies of power. It has stirred up the sense that people can shape and reshape their lives as equals, and not surprisingly it has often brought commotion into the world.

In the era of monitory democracy, the constant public scrutiny of power by hosts of differently sized monitory bodies with footprints large and small makes it the most energetic, most dynamic form of democracy ever. It even contains bodies, including Human Rights Watch, the Democratic Audit network and the Global Accountability Project, that specialise in providing public assessments of the quality of existing power-scrutinising mechanisms and the degree to which they fairly represent citizens' interests. Other bodies specialise in directing questions at governments on a wide range of matters, extending from their human rights records through to their energy production plans and the quality of the drinking water of their cities.

Private companies are grilled about their services and products, their investment plans, how they treat their employees, and the size of their impact upon the biosphere. Questions are raised about which SUVs are most likely to roll over, and which companies retail the worst fast food, and which are the biggest polluters. Various watchdogs and guide dogs and barking dogs are constantly on the job, pressing for greater public accountability of those who exercise power.

The powerful consequently come to feel the constant pinch of the powerless. In the era of monitory democracy, those who make decisions are subject constantly to the ideal of public chastening, tied down by a thousand Lilliputian strings of scrutiny.

When they do their job well, monitory mechanisms have many positive effects, ranging from greater openness and justice within markets and blowing the whistle on foolish government decisions to the general enrichment of public deliberation and the empowerment of citizens and their chosen representatives through meaningful schemes of participation. Power monitoring can be ineffective, or counterproductive, of course. Campaigns misfire or are poorly targeted; power

wielders cleverly find loopholes and ways of rebutting or simply ignoring their opponents. And there are times when large numbers of citizens find the monitory strategies of organisations too timid, or confused, or simply irrelevant to their lives as consumers, workers, parents, community residents and young and elderly citizens.

**D**espite such weaknesses, the political dynamics and overall 'feel' of monitory democracies are very different from the era of representative democracy. Politics in the age of monitory democracy has a definite 'viral' quality about it. The power controversies stirred up by monitory mechanisms follow unexpected paths and reach surprising destinations. Groups using mobile phones, bulletin boards, news groups, wikkies and blogs sometimes manage, against considerable odds, to publicly embarrass politicians, parties and parliaments, or even whole governments.

Power-monitoring bodies like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International regularly do the same, usually with help from networks of supporters. Think for a moment about any current public controversy that attracts widespread attention: news about its contours and commentaries and disputes about its significance are typically relayed by many power-monitoring organisations, large, medium and small. In the world of monitory democracy, that kind of latticed – viral, networked – pattern is typical, not exceptional. It has profound implications for the state-framed institutions of the old representative democracy, which find themselves more and more enmeshed in 'sticky' webs of power-scrutinising institutions that often hit their target, sometimes from long distances, often by means of boomerang effects.

In the age of monitory democracy, bossy power can no longer hide comfortably behind private masks; power relations everywhere are subjected to organised efforts by some, with the help of media, to tell others – publics of various sizes – about matters that previously had been hidden away, 'in private'. This denaturing of power is usually a messy business, and it often comes wrapped in hype, certainly. But the unmasking of power resonates strongly with the power-scrutinising spirit of monitory democracy.

The whole process is reinforced by the growing availability of cheap tools of communication (multi-purpose mobile phones, digital cameras, video recorders, the internet) to individuals and groups and organisations; and communicative abundance multiplies the genres of programming, information, and storytelling that are available to audiences and publics. News, chat shows, political oratory, bitter legal spats, comedy, infotainment, drama, music, advertising, blogs and much more clamour and jostle for public attention.

Some people complain about effects like 'information overload', but from the point of view of monitory democracy, on balance communicative abundance has positive consequences. In spite of all its hype and spin, the new media galaxy

nudges and broadens people's horizons. It tutors their sense of pluralism and prods them into taking greater responsibility for how, when and why they communicate. I recall days from my early years in South Australia when children were compulsorily bathed and scrubbed behind the ears, sat down in their dressing gowns prior to going to bed, and required to listen to radio or television program with their families – those days of representative democracy and party or government-linked broadcasting and mass entertainment are over. So, too, are the days when millions of people, huddled together as masses in the shadows of totalitarian power, found the skilfully orchestrated radio and film performances of demagogues fascinating, and reassuring.

Message-saturated democracies encourage people's suspicions of unaccountable power. All the king's horses and all the king's men are unlikely to reverse the trend. Within the world of monitory democracies, people are coming to learn that they must keep an eye on power and its representatives, that they must make judgements and choose their own courses of action. Citizens are tempted to think for themselves; to see the same world in different ways, from different angles; and to sharpen their overall sense that prevailing power relationships are not 'natural', but contingent.

Communicative abundance and monitory institutions combine to promote something of a 'Gestalt switch' in the popular perception of power. The metaphysical idea of an objective, out-there-at-a-distance 'reality' is weakened; so too is the presumption that stubborn 'factual truth' is superior to power. The fabled distinction between what people can see with their eyes and what they are told about the emperor's new clothes breaks down. 'Reality', including the 'reality' of the powerful, comes to be understood as always 'produced reality', a matter of interpretation – and the power to force particular interpretations of the world down others' throats.

There is admittedly nothing automatic or magical about any of this. In the era of monitory democracy, communication is constantly the subject of dissembling, negotiation, compromise and power conflicts – in a phrase,, a matter of politics. Communicative abundance for that reason does not somehow automatically ensure the triumph of either the spirit or institutions of monitory democracy. Message-saturated societies can and do have effects that are harmful for democracy. In some quarters, for instance, media saturation triggers citizens' inattention to events. While they are expected as good citizens to keep their eyes on public affairs, to take an interest in the world beyond their immediate household and neighbourhood, more than a few find it ever harder to pay attention to the media's vast outpourings.

Profusion breeds confusion. There are times, for instance when voters are so pelted with a hail of election advertisements on prime-time television that they react frostily. Disaffected, they get up from their sofas, leave their living rooms, change

channels, or mute, concluding with a heavy sigh that the less you know the better off you are. The coming age of internet protocol television is likely to deepen such disaffection and if that happens then something more worrying could happen: the spread of a culture of unthinking indifference.

Monitory democracy certainly feeds upon communicative abundance, but one of its more perverse effects is to encourage individuals to escape the great complexity of the world by sticking their heads, like ostriches, into the sands of wilful ignorance, or to float cynically upon the swirling tides and waves and eddies of fashion – to change their minds, to speak and act flippantly, to embrace or even celebrate opposites, to bid farewell to veracity, to slip into the arms of what some carefully call ‘bullshit’.

Foolish illusions, cynicism and disaffection are among the biggest temptations facing citizens and their elected and unelected representatives in existing democracies. Whether or not the new forms of monitory democracy will survive their deadly effects is for the future to tell us. ■

---

<sup>1</sup> The adjective ‘monitory’ derived from the mediaeval *monitoria* [from *monere*, to warn]. It entered Middle English in the shape of *monitorie* and from there it wended its way into the modern English language in the mid-fifteenth century to refer to the process of giving or conveying a warning of an impending danger, or an admonition to someone to refrain from a specified course of action considered offensive. It was first used within the Church to refer to a letter or letters (known as ‘monitories’) sent by a bishop or a pope or an ecclesiastical court who acted in the capacity of a ‘monitor’. The family of words ‘monitor’, ‘monition’ and ‘monitory’ was soon used for more secular or this-worldly purposes. The monitor was one or that which admonishes others about their conduct. The word ‘monitor’ was also used in school settings to refer to a senior pupil expected to perform special duties, such as that of keeping order, or (if the pupil was particularly bright or gifted) acting as a teacher to a junior class. A monitor also came to mean an early warning device; it was said as well to be a species of African and Australian and New Guinean lizard that was friendly to humans because it gave warning of the whereabouts of crocodiles. Still later, the word ‘monitor’ came to be associated with communication devices. It referred to a receiver, such as a speaker or a television screen, that is used to check the quality or content of an electronic transmission; and in the world of computing and computer science, a ‘monitor’ either refers to a video display or to a programme that observes, or supervises or controls the activities of other programmes. In more recent years, not unconnected with the emergence of monitory democracy, ‘to monitor’ became a commonplace verb to describe the process of systematically checking the content or quality of something, as when a city authority monitors the local drinking water for impurities, or a group of scientific experts monitors the population of an endangered species.

<sup>2</sup> The point can be put like this: if the principles of representative democracy turned ‘the people’ of assembly democracy into a more distant judge of how well representatives performed, then monitory democracy exposes the fiction of a unified ‘sovereign people’. The dynamic structures of monitory democracy daily serve as barriers against the uncontrolled worship of ‘the people’, or what might be dubbed demolatry. Monitory democracy demonstrates that the world is made up of many *demoi*, and that particular societies are made up of flesh-and-blood people who have different interests, and who therefore do not necessarily see eye to eye. It could be said that monitory democracy democratizes – publicly exposes - the whole principle of ‘the sovereign people’ as a pompous fiction; at best, it turns it into a handy reference device that most people know to be just that: a useful political fiction. There are indeed times when the fiction of ‘the people’ serves as a monitoring principle, as a former Justice of the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany, Dieter Grimm has explained: ‘The circumstances are rare in which the fiction of “the demos” is needed as a reminder that those who make the laws are not the source of their ultimate legitimacy. Democracies need public power; but they need as well to place limits on the exercise of public power by invoking “the people” as a fictional subject to whom collectively binding powers are attributed: a “Zurechnungssubjekt” that is not itself capable of acting, but which serves as a democratic necessity because it makes accountability meaningful’ (interview, Berlin, November 23, 2006).

---

[3](#) It is worth remembering that the word scrutiny originally meant 'to sort rubbish', from the Latin *scrutari*, meaning 'to search', and from *scruta*, 'rubbish'

[4](#) Reference would be useful for this, url or other

[5](#) Jonathan Zittrain full ref